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THOUGHTS
ON THE
RISE AND DECLINE
OF THE
POLITE ARTS,
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POLITICAL

THOUGHTS

On the RISE and DECLINE of the POLITE ARTS.

IT is a Fact worthy of Attention, that almost every Science or Art has shone in its greatest Splendor, at the apparent Period of its Commencement; but what renders it an Object of still more interesting Consideration is, that if the Arts have at any Time lain long dormant, the same Remark has been applicable at their Renewal.

What I here affirm, is I think, of too general Notoriety, to admit of its being in any Sort disputed; yet as a few Examples from different Ages and Countries, will be too shortly run over to tire much, and can therefore serve only to give it clearer Proof, I will begin with instancing Homer, who stands alone, and may in every Sense, justly be stiled the first of Poets, having (as far as could, from mere Tradition, be collected by the most antient Authors) preceded by some Centuries, even the Civilization of Nations. Lycurgus and Solon

stand foremost in the List of Legislators ; Pericles, as a Statesman ; Anaxagoras, Socrates, and Plato, as Philosophers ; Thucydides and Xenophon, as Historians ; and Phidias, as a Statuary, Architect, and general Director in all Matters of ornamental Grandeur ; these great Men as they excelled all, who came after them, even to the Time of Alexander, (which for Brevity I will pass over, as it will be soon alluded to) so, they were the first who in each Profession, after the *firm* Establishment of civil Society in Greece, attempted it : I shall say Nothing of their Painters, for, their Works being perished, it is impossible to form (however specious) any real Judgment of their Merit.

If we descend about four hundred Years lower, we shall equally find the first Pretenders to it, the most conspicuous at Rome ; and as the Dawning of Elegance in that famous City, was the Nurfing of Mecenas, he had likewise the compleat Satisfaction, of enjoying its full Meridian, of which Virgil and Horace give alone sufficient Testimony ; there was, from a Century at most, after the Decease of that amiable Man, a rapid Decline, and soon a total

tal Recess of Arts, for near fourteen more ; *when* * under the Protection and Encouragement of the Medicis Family, they again *at once* took Giant-Strides, in the Persons of Guiciardin, Machiavel, Pulci, Boyardo, Ariosto, Taffo, Michael Angelo, Leonardo, Titian, Raphael, and Corregio, besides many others ; and after flourishing about a Century and Half, had a most splendid and noble Exit, in the Bolognese School, under the three Carracci, and their three egregiously finished Pupils : Here too, as formerly in Greece, they travelled a few hundred Miles, and seemed after the same Lapse of Time, in the same Degree to regain their Vigour by a Change of Soil.

There appears a Kind of Uniformity in the Progress of these distant Events, more imputable to the consequentially necessary Effect of some latent Cause, than to that of mere Hazard ; and though directly to penetrate that Cause would be no easy Task, yet it might in some Measure lead to the Discovery, if we

* I am conscious of having *here* omitted Dante, Petrarc, and Bocaccio ; who, tho' preceding the others by near two Centuries, were but too like Comets, by a kind of insulated and unconnected Passage.

could prove (from a State of the Circumstances in which *those* set out, who first arrived at Consummacy in each Profession) that precisely such a Situation was best calculated for the producing a like Proficiency, and that when arrived at a certain Degree of Excellence, Reasons equally plausible were assigned for their Decline, if prosecuted on the Spot of their native Growth.

In order to the accounting for so seemingly strange a Truth, I will lay down one Supposition, founded I think in Reason; it is, that though there may be well allowed to exist in human Nature, most extraordinary *Aptitudes* to Genius, yet no One can be truly asserted to have been ever actually born with it, since innate Ideas of Perfection, are at *least* as repugnant to Reason, as those of other Matters, nor could they by any other natural Means, possibly enter the human Mind, than by those of Comparison, and should be therefore always understood as relative only.

Let us believe then, that Homer, and every other Leader in his respective Way, was blest with his happy Disposition, which I take to consist chiefly in an investigating Turn to in-
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quire after, a clear Judgment to distinguish, and an indefatigable and emulous Desire to excel what he has once found to have real Merit, which when extracted, in however small a Quantity, from the Dross it was surrounded with, he cautiously sets by, and relies on, as the Criterion, and sterling *Touch*, often to be resorted to, for the Trial of his future Labours.

As the fabulous Times of Heroism, Apotheism, and Mystery, could not fail of furnishing, to an accurate and diligent Searcher, a Model of this Nature, so it is the only Model, that could possibly lay no prejudicial Constraint upon the Fancy; which would neither be cramped by servile Attention to a compleat Original, nor circumscribed by the Fear of Repetition, and must consequently (amidst an endless Variety of virgin Materials) be left to the most free unbounded Pursuits; which, if on Examination, they were found too luxuriant, might at Pleasure be reduced to the Standard of his precious Fragment; nay, even the Trash he had discarded to obtain it, would be a rigorous Lesson to him, for the like Treatment of such of his own Productions as might suffer by a Comparison.

To avoid Prolixity and Confusion, I will confine myself to proving that the above Principles are in all Respects as applicable to Statuary and Painting, as to Poetry, and that where either is arrived at its Zenith, (it must, if the most providential Precautions be not taken to prevent it,) soon decline; *that* unavoidable Restraint, which perfect and *entire* Models will ever lay upon the Imagination, being, through the Interestedness of Parents, even solicited; for, instead of consulting the real Inclinations of Nature, at an Age when it might truly declare itself, Children are, *at best*, cheated into a too early Preference of that Profession, by which the Father's Avarice, Vanity, or Convenience, is likely easiest to be served; if it happens to be that of Statuary or Painting, the first Years are generally worse than lost, in copying the Works of their Master, or suppose, even those of the most eminent, with a view to the forming his Hand and his Judgment; and in Fact it does so to a Degree (if he succeeds at all) that becomes habitual, and can never after be sufficiently conquered, to admit of, even an Attempt to a genuine Production; examine the Works of
 Students

Students under this absurd Constraint, if the Scene and Dress be a little varied in them, the same Set of Gestures and of Countenances, ever plainly discovers from what *Troop* the Actors were borrowed; it might not improperly be termed a Species of *Compilation*; it is like that too, ever accompanied with inseparable Tameness.

Can the Indifference of Patrons, *then*, be wondered at, or the Decline which must of Consequence follow it? I will only add as a corroborating Proof of this Opinion, that the Egyptians, who, by a mistaken Law, were compelled to pursue the same Profession with their Fathers, in Despite of their indefatigable Perseverance in the Way of Sculpture, have never produced one tolerable Statue, Bas-relief, Gem, or Medal, tho' the Quantity they have left behind them is without Number.

In Opposition to a Conduct that appears so evidently pernicious to the polite Arts, if the State I have endeavoured to give of their Rise, Progress, and Decline, be a just one, Rules for their Perfection and Permanency, may, with the most obvious Facility, be drawn from it.

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Let us presume then, that like a Pericles or a Mecænas, the Person, who has Spirit and Taste enough to undertake the Patronage and Cultivation of Talents, has likewise *Discernment*, judiciously to select the aptest of the many ingenious and promising Youths, with which every Nation is furnished, and whose Hands (though destined by the Perverseness of their Parents to very different Employments) are already *formed* by the irresistible Propensity of Nature; indulged perhaps by Stealth, or for Recreation at their Hours of Leisure; in *such* Nothing would be wanting, after having made it their Interest and their Duty to pursue the real Impulse of their Fancy, but to supply them with the Means of doing it with Success.

Thus far might well have been formerly the Case, but as the imposing Influence of finished Works, could not then exist, it should now (if we would set out under a just Parity of Circumstances) be industriously obviated; yet as the totally avoiding it, would (if it were possible) be attended with much Trouble, the best Way would be to make of Necessity, Virtue, and in the Way of *Stimulus*, occasionally to shew them

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as a Reward to such as had already contracted an approved Manner of their own ; at the same Time pointing out such Excellencies, as the young Proficients might be themselves defective in, and not forgetting any Faults, which might encourage them to the Hopes of attaining to greater Excellence.

Their first regular Study should however be guided by Rules founded on the antient Principle, with this only profitable Deviation from it, that every useful advantage should be taken of the Experience and Perfection of former Ages, and the Pains and Difficulty of fixing Standards of what is masterly and elegant, effectually saved.

In Conformity then to this Maxim, each Student should be provided with a *perfect Limb*, cast from the most finished Statues extant, and its Character, whether of active Strength, or of Elegance and Delicacy, suited to the Turn of the Student, whose Taste was to be formed upon it ; they should have besides, each, a Set of Bones, well put together, for the Study of Osteology, and as both Beauty and Figure are *intirely founded* on the Structure of the Bones, they should be prepared from
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the best made Subject that could be got; in which, if the Head was unequal in Merit to the other Parts, one of a *proper Size* should be procured, having, (as in the best Grecian Sculpture) the Eye-Sockets or Brows, *prominent*, particularly on the Temple-Sides, and *capacious*; it matters not how they were *filled* when living, the Forehead should also be *high* and well *inclined*; when the solid Parts are great and *square*, they may be filled and covered at the Will of the Artist; and as a Proof of what Importance a strict Observance of this Ground-Work may be, it was solely to *that*, with a close Attention to the pleasing Passions, that the inimitable Corregio owed his great Reputation, for he was evidently but little versed in academical Drawing; It is to this Defect, that though extremely industrious to a very advanced Age, * I should attribute his having left behind him so inconsiderable a Number of finished Pictures; he had certainly a nice and difficult Eye, and I suppose such exquisite Sensibility himself, as not to be satisfied with copying the Feelings that Nature commonly expresses; he would exceed them, and his

* Vafari however asserts that he died under forty.

Want of Knowledge of the Muscles, on which all Expression must depend, might in that case well occasion such endless Retouches, as both protracted the Work, and dried, and thickened the Mass of Colours, to a Degree that even required his Thumb to spread them, in some of his best Performances.

I will now follow my Subject, without excusing a Digression, which when on the Actions of such a Man, can never be thought foreign to it.

The Study of the Muscles should on the Contrary, be made from continually varied Subjects, the homelier the better, if they were *truely* and *strongly marked*, that the Stile of the Pupil might have no Chance of forming itself on the constrained and uncooth Attitudes of a Porter.

In order to the speedy and effectual Attainment of this Knowledge, it should be the constant Lesson, even of Beginners, after having copied the exact opposite Sides of a human Figure, in the same continued Posture, a *third* and *fourth* Time, to fill the Out-line (*which is the same in both*) with the Muscles of the contrary Side, it would at once confirm their Memory,

mory, and their Judgment, as either must in this Case reciprocally help the other; the more advanced Students, should fill and shade the *Contour*, from their Knowledge alone, unassisted by the Recollection of a preceding Copy; the utmost that should be allowed in this Lesson, should be the Bones, which should indeed accompany every Lesson.

Cast's should also be taken from strong Subjects carefully *stay'd* in a lax, a tense, and a middle Position, for studying the Contexture of the Muscles, at the Angles of their Immersion: Likewise, a well injected Subject should be carefully prepared, with a View to explaining their Origin and Insertion; they should also be taught to transfer the Expression of an ordinary Countenance, that had much of it, to that of an unanimated Beauty; in all their Works, they should keep in View the Style of their *Fragment*, and when arrived at Perfection and Truth, in what is called Design, which with the Dispositions that were premised (thus cultivated) they would very shortly be, with both Entertainment and Ease to themselves, competitionary Tasks should be given them, in which the Story, or Act alone should

should be ascertained, the Drawing, or the Model first made, then the Picture, or Statue, and two Prizes given, the far greatest for Composition, which should include Gracefulness, Distinctness, *Keeping* as it is called, or true Perspective, and Accord, or Harmony of Colours. The second Prize for Expression, and both, to him who excels in each ; as to good Drawing, it is implied, or they could not be admitted as Candidates ; the same Rule should take place in Statuary, omitting in the first Prize a View to what can relate only to Painting.

The Laws of Perspective, and the reading Translations from Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Plutarch's Lives, and the Mythology, of the Heathens, should employ their Candle-light and Leisure Hours ; furnished with academical Knowledge of this Kind, which should terminate their Apprenticeship, when completed, *however early*, there would be little Danger of their deigning to imitate even a Policletus ; it is far more probable that they should aspire to the excelling all who had hitherto preceded them.

To explain what constitutes Grace and Elegance, is, by Words alone, I confess, somewhat

somewhat difficult ; the Models in order to the doing it effectually should be present ; yet as I have already gone much further into this Inquiry than I at first intended, I will try at least to fix some leading Maxims towards the conveying an Idea of it, by mere oral Explanation.

If Gracefulness were not intrinsically meritorious, but a mere *Feather in the Cap of Youth*, (for I shall endeavour to found this too on Reason) it could never have been so universally applauded ; let us conclude it then to have its *real* Advantages, and to what can they be more justly annexed, than to an exact *Propriety of Action*, which if at the same Time so *habitual* as to mark no constrained Attention to its Observance, is true Elegance ; its seeming the Result of innate Direction, is what stamps a genuine Nobleness upon it, in Opposition to *that*, awkwardly contracted from Imitation, which, as it implies an original Want of it, so it is easily discoverable by a partial, occasional, forced Display, and a precise Repetition of it ; for, as Habit has in most Men, caused such a Predilection for one Hand, as even to term it the Right, to the actual Prejudice of the other,

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whose very Strength, as well as Address, is impaired by it, so it fares with the Muscles in general; if they have not from his Infancy been *properly* exercised, they are throughout the whole Man, in the same Predicament with the left Hand: Observe for Instance but a Clown, he invariably moves the whole Limb, for what required only its Extremity, the *Fist* for the Fingers, which have commonly lost even the Power of Extension, and are become nearly similar to, and as useless as the Toes; he is in Danger every Step, for the Foot is sure to be the last in a Line perpendicular to the Burthen it should support; he loses half his Vigour and his Height, by an ill-judged Laxity from the Ankle to the Neck: The Part above his Knee, and what should be the Small of his Leg, is loaded with Muscles, that for want of bracing, have never taken a tendonous Form; he does all Things with equal Force, his Spoon is *grasped* as his Pitch-fork; in short, he is become from his slovenly Carriage, so totally oppressed with continued Lassitude, that if he but seat himself, you tremble for the Chair into which he abandons his unweildly Mass.

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This is, you will say, an Image of Sloth indeed ! allowed, it is that of the lowest human State ; but grant too, that though endless the Degrees, the nearer any Man approaches to this, the greater will be his Difficulty in contracting Habits of Elegance ; and, that if a thorough Boor, could be at *Man's Estate*, at once inspired with a true *Conception* of every Requisite to the Attainment of Propriety, his very training of the Muscles to an Obedience of his Will, would be like teaching to the Left, the *Right Hand's Cunning*, which when effected, would ever clash with the Appearance of Limbs, no longer, perhaps, reducible to graceful Form.

From this negative View, some Idea may be conceived of what Grace and Elegance would be ; King Charles could find it even in Things inanimate : Let us, though not strictly in Point, for Curiosity, examine by the above Principle, those which he is said to have called the three noblest Objects. The first is a perfect Horse, and in Truth, can there be imagined a Form and Action more graceful, and better calculated to its End, than what is seen
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in that useful Animal? The Woman, which he supposes great with Child, is probably indebted for his Preference, to the having been *gradually* compelled (by an imperceptible Attention to her State) to make every Movement to Advantage. Thirdly, the Ship, under full and swelling Sail, though she proclaims every Power effectually employed, yet with what superior and becoming Ease she glides along. Whether their Appearance was what alone constituted their pre-eminent Merit in the King's Opinion, or that it was founded, (though less in Character) on a Prospect of the future Benefit each might be productive of, or the joint Result of Reflection upon both, I will not pretend to determine, but we must at least confess, that they are all three strongly marked with an apparently unconstrained *Propriety of Action*.

If we consider the best Grecian Sculpture, whether Statues or Figures in Relief, we shall find the Form of their respective Limbs to be such, as implies their having been exercised from their Infancy, with a View to the Character represented, and consequently, that the Attitude they are placed in, far from being
uneasy

uneasy, was what Habit of itself invited the Muscles to assume, which, it is well known to Anatomists, *impress their Forms upon the very Bones*, in strong and active Men. Their Orators, and other erect Figures are usually represented as in Motion, which they justly express by an almost strait Knee, in the advanced supporting Limb ; the other, in nearly a Line behind it, is bent and raised upon the Toe, in Readiness to be brought forward : In those supposed standing in a fixed Position, the hind Knee is nearly strait, sustaining almost the whole Weight, the foremost somewhat bent, the Toe *moderately* turned out, and at some *lateral* Distance from the other, but very little before it ; could any Postures more distinctly answer the Intention, the first would be uneasy, were any Thing besides Motion meant ; the second is at once the most firm, advantageous, and unaffected.

As both these Attitudes (the Propriety of which will scarcely be disputed) must imply a necessary Contrast in the lower Limbs, they must likewise equally affect the Body, and by Consent of Parts, influence the upper Ones ; for if the Weight is for Steadiness and Convenience

nience, chiefly repofed on one Leg, it will be found eligible in moft Actions to ufe the contrary Arm, as the freeft, becaufe on the Side moft at reft; and at any Rate, (if we wifh them to appear unconftained) to vary the Action of both; parallel Lines, then, we fee, and Regularity of Action, are as unapt and uneafy, as they appear unpictorefque and inelegant.

FINIS.

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